

Spots of news

Fenix Carriage Dog Trials report by Anne Dickens

Lincomb Chasers in Stourport-on-Severn, one of a national network of chaser courses, was the stunning venue for this year's Fenix Carriage Dog Trials. Our hosts, Rebecca and Tony Symonds, were hugely welcoming and not a little intrigued by the unusual competition that was being held on their land. They got a bit of a clue with the influx of a higher than usual proportion of spotted horses, something many equestrian inclined Dalmatian owners can't resist, ranging from my own pair of 11.2hh ponies to a stunning 17hh Danish Knabstrupper, which has carried the Road Dog Champion handler in four out of five trials outings.

The course itself was delightful and it was a real pleasure to drive the six mile trail twice with my dogs. It was both picturesque and challenging. At many points you could see the Malvern Hills staring straight back at you and, on one track towards the end of the course, you were rewarded with a stunning view down and across to the River Severn over a one hundred foot drop - slightly nerve-wracking for those of us with Dalmatians that hunt!

The course wound through woodland, past vast lakes and along field margins. There were water splashes, adverse cambers and a good number of steep ups and downs, so steep at one point that my groom was on the ground hanging onto the back of my little two-wheeler to help keep the pony upright. Luckily, in the carriage dog trials, although the horses are vetted for the silver and gold tests for safety and welfare reasons, as it is the dog that is being trialled, there are no penalties for your groom getting off.

We had a record number of carriage entries this year, boosted by the introduction of a Groom Handler Class for those Dalmatian owners who are not equestrians or who cannot drive but who would like to work their dogs. This class was also introduced to differentiate between whip competitors, who are handling two animals, horse and dog, and grooms who have just the dog to contend with. This recognises both the skill of double animal handling (along with our ridden competitors) for the Championship and the special qualities and skills required to be a groom dog handler. We are very grateful to those volunteer whips who enabled people to compete. We are likely to be returning to Stourport next year on the same first weekend in July. If anyone is interested in a social weekend with lovely driving in good company, without the pressure of competition (at least not yours!), do please get in touch. We nearly always have dogs needing turnouts.

If you're not sure what this is all about, the Fenix Carriage Dog Trials is a national competition, sponsored by Fenix Carriages, to demonstrate the traditional use of Dalmatians as a companion, decoration and guard for horses and carriages in past times. It is both an endurance and obedience event and all



competing dogs must do a basic obedience test alongside their handler's carriage. The aim of the obedience test is to replicate, as far as possible, modern carriage working environments, where the dog must be under the handler's control at all times. The endurance element tests each competing Dalmatian's stamina and capacity for work. It is essential that the dogs show willingness and enjoyment of their work throughout the trial.

Our carriage dog judge this year was Maggie Saunders from the Forest of Dean, herself a keen driver with her pony Risky and a past carriage dog trials competitor. Maggie said, "It was a privilege to judge these working Dalmatians and I was very pleased with the high standards of obedience this year. The competition is maturing and as more people are working their dogs, I am sure we'll see more competitors year on year."

Spin, a young liver bitch owned and handled by Avril Pluck of Shropshire, became Carriage Dog Champion this year after

winning the Silver Carriage Dog Class. Spin completed a 20km endurance course and Avril was delighted when the equine vet judge awarded her pony Louie the British Carriage Dog Society special rosette for Best Condition Horse. Spin has a very strong coaching instinct and never leaves her carriage. Avril drives out on the roads with her every day and said "There could be a cock fight under my carriage and Spin wouldn't budge". A worthy champion indeed.

Finally, many thanks to In Harness for donating a year's subscription to one of our groom handler winners. AD



Winner of the Bronze Groom Handler class Skittle, owned and handled by Gail Cotterill of Kent with whip John Wilmott and his pony Hugo. Below, Carriage Dog Champion Spin in the axle exercise



Find out more about the world of carriage dogs: contact Alison Burgess, 01435 813267 or see www.carriagedog.org

Fenix Carriage Dog Trials driving classes results:
Carriage Dog Silver 1 Spin, Avril Pluck (Whip) Carriage Dog Champion, 2 Fenris, Anne Dickens (Whip), Reserve Carriage Dog Champion **Carriage Dog Silver (Groom Handler)** 1 Freya, Anna Gambles (Anne Dickens: Whip) Groom's Award, 2 Todd, Tim Stafford (Julie Swindells: Whip) **Carriage Dog Bronze** 1 Munin, Anne Dickens **Carriage Dog Bronze (Groom Handler)** 1 Nugget, Gail Cotterill (John Wilmott: Whip), 2 Todd, Gail Cotterill (John Wilmott: Whip), 3 Brio, Stephanie Ely (John Wilmott: Whip) **Best Condition Dog** Mollie, Wesley Evans Pigden **Best Condition Horse** Louis, Avril Pluck